A PARTICULAR PEACE

May 31, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Micah 4:1-4
John 14:25-31

"...Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you..."
-John 14:27 (NRSV)

Confession, they say, is good for the soul. And so in the interest of starting this new week off on the right foot I am going to make a confession. I have never preached a passable sermon on the topic of peace. I take comfort in the fact that I am not alone. Roman Catholic scholar, Gerard Sloyan, observes that our text this morning ordinarily brings out the banal in the preacher... After all, what can you say about peace except that it is a good idea? And sermons on the topic, he observes, are consistently boring. [Interpretation, John, p. 177]

And yet, my church, the Presbyterian (U.S.A.), declares that it is for peace every year. "Peacemaking," the Presbyterian Church says, "is the believers' calling." It is what Christians are to do, what we are about. I have read the literature and attended seminars, and I have learned how complex peace is, how easy to over-simplify, but also how absolutely important the to ic is. I have also learned how mixed-up our ideas about peace can become with our feelings about our nation.

I once led a senior high school work-study trip on the topic of peace. We visited and worked at Corrymeela, an ecumenical peace community in Northern Ireland which brings together people who are on either side of the issues which so tragically divide that community. Corrymeela, actually, gets people talking to each other instead of shooting, which many agree is, if not peace, at least an improvement. And then we visited and worked at Iona, one of my favorite places, an island off the west coast of Scotland where Celtic missionaries from Ireland first landed in the Sixth Century, and where today there is a restored abbey and the Iona Community - dedicated to the Peace of the World. I am an associate of the Iona Community. But when we took our senior high school students there to attend an international symposium

on peace it turned out to be a kind of annual reunion gathering of a group of British Socialists who were unhappy because of America's nuclear weapons aimed at the Soviet Union from bases in Great Britain - thus making them, not us, primary first strike targets. They were not only unhappy about that, but it seemed to me, they were really unhappy because our youngsters were wearing such expensive sneakers and looked so prosperous.

My colleague on that particular adventure was a minister who had graduated from Annapolis, served nine years in the United States Navy on nuclear submarines before he felt the hand of God tapping him on the shoulder. Jerry listened to the United States and its military, specifically, being criticized with mounting indignation... And I wondered what he was thinking about. I became concerned when, with a devilish twinkle in his eye, he told an outrageous Navy story, full of black humor... something about "candy missles." And then, having gotten their attention, he said, with grace and conviction:

> "I joined the Navy because I felt called to in the same way I feel called to ministry. I believed that I was involved in peacemaking then. I still do."

It was a great moment.

And so, my confession must include my observation that some of the people who talk longest and loudest and most definitively about peace, don't seem to have ever been in an important fight.

There is, let us be clear, nothing good about war. I have not personally fought in one, but I have been close. With a lot of other college students my age I sat in a class for two years to learn how, on a very basic level, to do the coordinates for high altitude bombing - factoring in air speed, wind, altitude, impact, objective. And eventually I reflected that some of my classmates, ten years later, were doing that over the jungles of Viet Nam, unloading B-52s day after day, simply obliterating everything in wide swaths of jungle; carpet-bombing we call it, designed to kill every living thing, five, six, ten football fields long... just like the pictures we watched in the class. I don't think I've ever talked to anyone who has actually participated in a war - not in a movie theater, but an actual shooting and killing war - who believed that it was a good idea.

So ambiguity about peace is not enthusiasm for war. It is simply that there have been, by my lights, some important fights, some necessary wars, and some noble sacrifice, and some selfless dying - for which I continue to be grateful. And that is part of why we are uncomfortable when peace rhetoric becomes simplistic.

I read an essay on the topic this week by Episcopal clergy Barbara Brown Taylor, which identified part of our problem. We equate peace with passivity. "A peaceful person," she wrote, "is quiet and untroubled. To hold one's peace means to be quiet, to make peace means to surrender, and to rest in peace, after all, means to die. Given all these choices, is it any wonder that we feel some ambivalence about whether or not we want this kind of peace in our lives." [Weavings, "A Fierce and Realistic Peace," March, April, 1988, p. 7]

The funeral home is the one time we hear our friends described as peaceful, as in "Doesn't he look peaceful?"

One time, actually a very significant time, Jesus said to his disciples, "Peace I give to you. My peace... Not as the world gives."

Some translate it:

> "Peace is my parting gift to you" [Taylor] or
> "Peace is my farewell." [R. E. Brown]

It was the Last Supper... a time for summing up... for saying important things... one of them was this:

> "Peace I give to you - My peace."

It is a fundamental Scriptural idea... God's peace... the peace of the creation. The word is one you know - "shalom." It is a word Jesus knew. It is the word, in its aramaic equivalent that he would have used here. "Shalom - my shalom."

"A word so rich," Barbara Brown Taylor observes, "it embraces all realms of human life." For the individual shalom meant wholeness, integrity and self-possession as evidenced by bodily health, longevity and prosperity. To have shalom meant to enjoy the free, uninhibited growth of the soul in community with others and in right relationship with God." [op. cit., p. 7-9]

Shalom - wholeness, well-being.

Psalm 133 expresses it eloquently:

> "How very good and pleasant it is
> when kindred live together in unity!
> It is like the precious oil
> on the head,..."

It is putting your babies to bed and singing them to sleep and knowing they are safe and well. It is walking down Pearson and seeing children of two or three races playing in a sandbox. It is sitting in grace-filled silence with your parent.

It - shalom - is individual and communal and spiritual.

It is the peace of the world when swords are beaten into plowshares, and it is comfortability with yourself, living in justice with your neighbors and in right relationship with God.

All of that is the content of the word Jesus used when he said, "My peace."

It is not the simple absence of conflict. Peace enforced by a powerful oppressor is not peace. Everybody knows that. When Jesus said those words he was in the middle of a major conflict, with the political authorities and there is, in addition, every evidence that there was major conflict in his own soul. So, neither is shalom a kind of placid peace of mind.

That is, of course, what we have made it. Confronted by a world in which conflict continues to be a daily reality, we retreat and go inward. Think of the tragic irony of Yugoslavia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, held in peace - if peace is the absence of conflict - by an authoritarian political entity... And when suddenly free of that authority, suddenly turning on each other with an unbelievable degree of violence and hatred. We live in a world and a culture that is increasingly violent: more automatic weapons, more murders, capital punishment very nearly on the evening news, live and in color -- reporters outside the prison to be sure we can experience it up close; movies and television cluttered with exploding cars, the human body hacked, stabbed, mutilated; force, coercion, violence as a way to resolve differences. There is not much peace actually.

And so what peace there is we assume will be found internally. "Peace of mind." There are a plethora of peace of mind merchants and methodologies. The Sunday Tribune, last week offered the following:

> "At home, at work, in transit, even on vacation, most of us could benefit from more relaxation and stress reduction." And then a resume of the following techniques for achieving some peace of mind: "massage therapy, yoga, exercise, progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, environmental peace - which, if you can't make it to the ocean or mountain top means - looking intently at a house plant, music therapy and aromatherapy.
>
> "The food/mood connection -- eat pasta, popcorn and bread instead of hamburgers and New York strip steaks which signal your body 'to brace itself' for work and battle."

Peace of mind as a reduction of internal stress is a very good idea. But it is not, I think, what Jesus meant.

The prophets helped Israel to learn that peace had more to do with justice than with anything else. A difficult lesson for them and for us. The prophets were critical of the preachers who proclaimed peace when there was no justice. Individually, peace means being reconciled, living in integrity and love with your neighbors, your family, your co-workers, your employees, employer. It doesn't much matter what else is going on. If there is no justice, no reconciliation here in your own personal relationships you will not have peace.

Jesus took that idea and placed it squarely in the matrix of the divine and human: God and you. To put it simply... Get right with God and you will receive peace. Neglect that, avoid it, banish it to the back compartment of your mind, and you will know what peace is primarily by its absence.

Now there is an ethical and social imperative. There is no more important topic than the peace of the world, peace between nations, and peace among various communities within our nation. It is, very simply, the highest priority for those of us who claim as Lord one who is known as Prince of Peace.

We may differ on strategies, but we must be untied in truth telling and in our particular understanding that the way to make peace is to work for justice. And, it is to confess and acknowledge that we are an increasingly violent nation, that we choose to deal with injustice, not by establishing justice, but with an escalation of violence. Each incremental increase in public violence, by some devilish logic, seems to lead us to embrace even more violence. By some incredible departure from sanity, the easiest response to the presence and use of military assault weapons in our streets - is for everyone to own one. The saddest image of our deep pathology was the N.R.A. using a picture of Korean shop owners defending their stores.

Death by hand gun and automatic weapon is so much a part of America and happens so routinely and commonly across the life of this city that we don't much notice it any more.

On the first day of the week in which he would die violently Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem and he said "would that you knew the things that make for peace." Would he not weep over the dying innocent children in Chicago's ghettos, caught in the crossfire between gangs? Would he not weep over the picture of those frightened Koreans with their shot guns?

And looking at this wonderful nation, would he not weep over the simple fact that the one area of pure scientific research

unscathed by economizing cutbacks in recent years is not cancer, Alzheimer's, AIDS, environment, food production - but thermal nuclear weapons. Lewis Thomas writes: "the amount of money (invested in weapons research and development) is enough to sustain all other fields of basic science for generations... enough to build Scarsdale on Mars if he had a mind to. We could be gardening out in the galaxy. We could free ourselves from disease. We could solve our energy problems. We could begin paying attention to our children." [Late Night Thoughts While Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony, p. 83]

Several years ago Frederick Buechner wrote about peace in a way that sounds prophetic today:

> "A nation has only so much money to spend, so much time, so much energy, so much ingenuity to spend and as the years go by we and our enemies are both spending so much of all of these things on the great instruments of death that we have less and less to spend on hospitals and housing and schools." [A Room Called Remember, p. 76]

When we talk about peace in the context of our faith in the one who was Prince of Peace, we must be willing at least to risk seeing the truth and telling truth and acknowledging that truth in the public sphere is a matter of politics and budgets and priorities.

Personally, it has to do with justice - right relationships. If you seek peace, be a reconciler and peacemaker wherever you are. If you want peace in your heart, make peace with your spouse, your friend, your church, your neighbor.

"My peace - not the world's," he said. And I know that what he meant was that ultimate reconciliation between God and you that he came to proclaim and to effect. At the heart of it all is a basic human hunger for peace with God. You can spend your life trying to describe it in respectable intellectual categories - none of which are any more helpful than this... You need and I need to be reconciled, in relationship with, at peace, with the God who made us, who continues to love us, who is present every-day in our lives.

What Jesus was saying to his friends at the table of the Last Supper and by extension to you and me, was very good news. The peace we seek and need - has been given. God's love has been expressed: God's commitment to us is complete: the door is open, there is a place at the table, there is a loving father - or mother - with outstretched arms to welcome us home.

"My peace," he said, "I give to you."

St. Paul would later say of him simply:

"He is our Peace..."

Apart from our ability to understand it or articulate the notion of peace, God's peace, the peace of Jesus Christ is so central to Christian experience that one of the oldest liturgical acts in our tradition is the Passing of the Peace. Worshipers greet one another with a hand clasp and the words:

"The Peace of Jesus Christ be with you."

At the end of the service this morning, I invite you to affirm it and claim it and say it, even if you don't understand it. When you greet your neighbors this morning, extend to them and yourself the magnificent promise of his particular peace.

"The Peace of Jesus Christ be with you."